

# A POLISH SCENE

WLADYSLAW STANISLAW REYMONT[1]

[Footnote 1: The stroke softens the l approximately to the sound of w.]

[The place is a solitary inn in Russian Poland, near the Prussian frontier, kept by a Jew named Herszlik, part of whose occupation is to smuggle emigrants for America by night across the border. Besides emigrants and Herszlik are present an old beggar man and his wife or 'doxy', a couple of peasants drinking together, and Jan (or, in diminutive form, Jasiek), a youth who has just escaped from a prison to which he had been sentenced for an attack, under great provocation, on a steward, and now creeps into the inn out of the surrounding forest.]

It was a night of March, a night of rain, cold, and tempest.

The forest, cramped, stiff, soaked to its marrow, and agitated now and then by an icy shiver, threw out its boughs in a sort of feverish panic as if to shake the water from them, and roared the wild note of a creature in torture. At times a damp snow stilled all to helpless silence, broken by a passing groan or the cry of some frozen bird or rattle of some body falling on the boughs. Then once more the wind flung itself with fury on the woods, dug into their depths with its teeth, tore off boughs, and with a roar of triumph whistled along the glades and swept the forest as with a besom; or from out of the depths of space huge mud-coloured clouds, like piles of rotting hay, strangled the trees in their embrace, or dissolved in a cold unceasing drizzle that might have penetrated a stone. The roads were deserted, flooded with a mixture of mud and foul snow; the villages seemed dead, the fields shrivelled, the rivers ice-fettered; man and life were to be seen nowhere; night ruled alone.

Only in the single inn of Przylecki shone a small light; it stood in the middle of the forest at cross roads; a few cottages were visible on the side of a hill: the rest was the mighty forest.

Jasiek Winciorek pushed forward cautiously from the wood to the road, and at sight of the blinking light walked stealthily to the window, peeped in, then in timid perplexity drew back a few steps till a fresh blast of wind froze him so that the poor boy turned back once more, crossed himself, and entered.

The inn was large, with a floor of clay, and a black ceiling resting on walls out of the perpendicular; these had lost their whitewash, and were pierced by two small windows half-choked up with straw. Directly opposite the latter, behind a wooden railing, stood a cask resting on other barrels, above which smoked the red glare of a naphtha lamp. Over the room lay a dense darkness, only lightened now and then with flashes from an expiring fire in a large old-world fire-place, before which sat a pair of beggars. In a corner might be seen a number of persons huddled together whispering mysteriously. By the cask were two peasants, one clasping a bottle, the other holding out a glass; they often drank healths to one another and nodded sleepily. A fat red damsel was snoring behind the railing. Over all there spread a smell compounded of whisky, sodden clay, and soaked rags.

At times such a stillness fell on the room that one could hear the sounds of the forest, the tinkle of the rain on the window-panes, the crackling of the pine boughs in the fireplace. And then a low door behind the railing opened with a creak, and there appeared

the old grey head of a Jew, dressed in his praying gown, and singing in a low voice, while behind him shone a room lighted with small candles, from which issued Sabbath smells and a quiet monotonous dreary sound of singing. Jasiiek drank a few glasses one after the other, gnawed half-consciously some mouldy rolls as tough as leather, which he seasoned with a herring, and looked now at the door, now at the window, or listened to the murmur of the voices.

'Marry, no, curse it, I won't marry!' suddenly shouted one of the two peasants, knocking his bottle on the cask and spitting as far as the shoulder of the beggar man at the fire.

'But you must,' whispered the other, 'or repay the money.'

'God! that's nothing! Jevka!'—this to the girl—'half a pint of whisky! I pay!'

'Money is a big thing, though a woman is a bigger.'

'No, curse it, I won't marry! I'll sell myself, borrow, pay back the money, rather than marry that harriedan.'

'Just take a drop to my health, Antek: I have something to say to you.'

'You won't get round me. I have said no, and that is no. Why, if I must, I will run away to Brazil or the end of the world with those folk yonder!'

'Silly! just take a drop to my health, Antek: I have something to say to you.'

They drank healths to one another several times, then began kissing, then fell silent, for a child was crying in a corner, and a movement began among the quiet timid crowd.

A tall dried-up peasant appeared out of the darkness and walked out of the inn.

Jasiiek moved up to the fire, for the cold was in his bones, and putting his herring on a stick began to toast it over the coals. 'Move up a bit,' he whispered to the beggar man, who had his feet on his wallet, and though quite blind, was drying at the fire the soaked strips he wore round his legs, and talking endlessly in a low voice to the woman by him; she was cooking something and arranging boughs under a tripod on which stood a pot.

Jasiiek got warmer, and steam as from a bucket of boiling water went up from his long coat.

'You are badly soaked,' whispered the beggar, sniffing.

'I am,' said Jasiiek in a whisper, shivering. The door creaked, but it was only the thin peasant returning.

'Who is that?' whispered Jasiiek, tapping the beggar on the arm.

'Those? I don't know him; but those are silly fools going to Brazil.'

He spat. Jasiiek said not a word, but went on drying himself and moving his eyes about the room, where the people, apparently grown uneasy, now talked with increasing loudness, now fell suddenly silent, while every moment one of them went out of the inn, and returned immediately.

From the inner room the monotonous chant still reached them. A hungry dog crept out from nowhere to the fire and began to growl at the beggars, but getting a blow from a stick he howled with pain, settled himself in the middle of the room, and with a piteous look gazed at the steam rising from the pot.

Jasiiek was getting warmer; he had eaten his herring and rolls, but still felt more sharply than ever that he wanted something. He minutely searched his pockets, but not finding even a farthing there, doubled himself together and gazed idly at the pot and the beams of the fire.

'You want to eat—eh?' asked the beggar woman presently.

'I have... a small rumbling in my belly.'

'Who is it?' the beggar man softly inquired of the woman.

'Don't be afraid,' she growled with malice: 'he won't give you a threepenny bit, not so much as a farthing.'

'A farmer?'

'Yes, a farmer, like you: one who goes about the world'—and she took the pot off the tripod.

'And there are good people in the world—and wild beasts—and pigs out of sties.... Hey?' said the beggar man, poking Jasiek with his stick.

'Yes, yes,' answered the boy, not knowing what he said.

'You have something on your mind, I see,' whispered the beggar.

'I have.'

'The Lord Jesus always said: "If you are hungry, eat; if you are thirsty, drink; but if you are in trouble, don't chatter."'

'Eat a little,' the woman begged the boy; 'it is beggars' food, but it will do you good,' and she poured out a liberal portion on a plate. From the bag she drew out a piece of brown bread and put it in the soup unnoticed; then as he moved up to eat and she saw his worn grey face, mere skin and bone, pity so moved her that she took out a piece of sausage and laid it on the bread.

Jasiek could not resist but ate greedily, from time to time throwing a bone to the dog, who had crept up with entreating eyes.

The beggar man listened a long time; then, when the woman put the pot into his hands, he raised his spoon and said solemnly:

'Eat, man. The Lord Jesus said, give a beggar a farthing and another shall repay thee ten. God be with you!'

They ate in silence, till in an interval the beggar rubbed his mouth with his cuff and said:

'Three things are needful for food to do you good—spirit, salt, bread. Give us spirit, woman!'

All three drank together and then went on eating.

Jasiek had almost forgotten his danger and threw no more timid looks around. He just ate, sated himself with warmth, sated slowly the four-days' hunger that gnawed him, and felt peaceful in the quietness.

The two peasants had left the cask, but the crowd in the corner on benches or with their bags under their heads on the wet floor were still quietly dreaming; and still came, but in ever sleepier tones, the sound of singing from the inner room. And the rain was still falling and penetrating the roof in some places; it dripped from the ceiling and formed shining sticky circles of mud on the clay floor. And still at times the wind shook the inn or howled in the fire-place, scattered the burning boughs and drove smoke into the room.

'There is something for you too, vagabond!' whispered the woman, giving the rest of the food to the dog, who flitted about them with beseeching eyes.

Then the beggar spoke. 'With food in his belly a man is not badly off, even in hell,' he said, setting down the empty pot.

'God repay you for feeding me!' said Jasiek, and squeezed the beggar's hand; the other did not at once let him go, but felt his hand carefully.

'For a few years you have not worked with your hands,' he murmured; but Jan tore his hand away in a fright.

'Sit down,' continued the beggar, 'don't be afraid. The Lord Jesus said: "All are just men who fear God and help the poor orphan." Fearnot, man. I am no Judas nor Jew, but an honest Christian and a poor orphan myself.'

He thought for a moment, then in a quiet voice said:

'Attend to three things: love the Lord Jesus, never be hungry, and give to a man more unfortunate than yourself. All the rest is just nothing, rotten fancies. A wise man should never vex himself uselessly. Ho! we know a dozen things. Eh, what do you say?'

He pricked up his ears and waited, but Jasiek remained stubbornly silent, fearing to betray himself; then the beggar brought out his bark snuffbox, tapped it with his finger, took snuff, sneezed, and handed it to the boy. Then, bending his huge blind face over the fire, he began to talk in low monotonous tones.

'There is no justice in the world; all men are Pharisees and rogues; one man pushes another in front of him out of the way; each tries to be the first to cheat the other, to eat him up. That wasn't the will of the Lord Jesus. Ho! go into a squire's house, take off your cap, and sing, though your throat is bursting, about Jesus and Mary and all the Saints; then wait—nothing comes. Put in a few prayers about the Lord's Transfiguration; then wait. Nothing again. No, only the small dogs whine about your wallet and the maids bustle behind the hedges. Add a litany—perhaps they give you two farthings or a mouldy bit of bread. Curse you! I wish you were dirty, half-blind, and had to ask even beggars for help! Why, after all that praying the whisky to wash my throat with costs me more than they give!' He spat with disgust.

'But are others better off, eh?' he continued, after a sniff. 'Jantek Kulik—I dare say you know him—took a little pig of a squire's. And what enjoyment did he have of it? Precious little. It was a miserable creature, like a small yard dog; you could drown the whole body of him in a quart of whisky. Well, for that he was arrested and put in prison for half a year—and for what? for a miserable pig! as if a pig weren't one of God's creatures too, and some were meant to die of hunger, and some to have more than they can stuff into their throats. And yet the Lord Jesus said: "What a poor man takes, that is as if you had given it for My sake." Amen. Won't you take a drink?'

'God repay you, but it has already turned my head a bit!'

'Silly! the Lord Jesus himself drank at feasts. Drinking is no sin; it is a sin, sure enough, to swill like a pig or to sit without talking when good folk are gossiping, but not to drink the gift of God to the bottom. You just drink my health,' he whispered resolutely.

He drank himself from the bottle with a long gurgle in his throat; then handing it to Jasiek, said merrily:

'Drink, orphan. Observe only three things—to work the whole week, to say your Paternoster, and on Sunday to give to the unfortunate, and then you shall have redemption for your soul. Man, if you can't drink a gallon, drink a quart!'

Thereupon all fell silent. The woman was sleeping with her head drooping by the extinct flame, the man had opened wide his cataract-covered eyes at the glowing coals, and once and again nodded vigorously. In the corner the whispers were silent; only the wind struck the panes more violently than ever and shook the door, and from the inner room burst forth the voices in an ecstasy, it seemed, of pity or despair.

Jasiek, overcome by the warmth of the whisky, felt sleepy, stretched his legs out towards the fire, and felt an irresistible desire to lie down. He fought against it with energetic movements, but every now and then became utterly stiff and remembered nothing. A pleasant warm mist compounded out of the beams of the fire, kindly words, and stillness, wrapped him in darkness and a deep sense of freedom and security. At times he woke suddenly, he could not have said why, glanced over the room, or listened for a moment to the beggar, who was asleep but still muttered: 'For all souls in Purgatory—Ave Maria, gratia plena,' and then, 'Man, I tell you that a good beggar should have a stick with a point, a deep wallet, and a long Paternoster.' Here he woke up, and feeling Jasiek's eyes on him, recovered his wits and began to speak:

'Hear what an old man says. Take a drop to my health, and listen. Man, I tell you, be prudent, but don't force it into any one's eyes. Note everything, and yet be blind to everything. If you live with a fool, be a greater fool; with a lame man, have no legs at all; with a sick man, die for him. If men give you a farthing, thank them as if it were a bit of silver; if they set dogs on you, take it as your offering to the Lord Jesus; if they beat you with a stick, say your Paternoster.

'Man, I tell you, do as I advise and you shall have your wallet full, your belly like a mountain, and you shall lead the whole world

in a string like silly cattle.... Eh, eh, I am a man not born to-day but one that knows a dozen things. He that can observe the way of the world, no trouble shall come to him. At the squire's house take your revenge on the peasants; that is a sure farthing and perhaps a morsel from the dinner; at the priest's abuse the peasants and the squires; that is two farthings sure, and absolution too; and when you are in the cottages, abuse everything, and you will eat millet and bacon, and drink whisky mixed with fat.'

Here he began to drowse, still murmuring incoherently, 'Man, I tell you... for the soul of Julina... Ave Maria...', and rocked on the bench.

'Gratia plena... help a poor cripple!' This was the woman babbling in her sleep, as she raised her head from the fire-place; but the man woke up suddenly and cried, 'Be quiet, silly!' for the entrance door was thrown loudly open, and there pushed in among them a tall yellow-haired Jew.

'On to the road,' he called in a deep voice, 'it's time!'; and at once the whole crowd of sleepers sprang to their feet, began to put their loads on their backs, to get ready, to push forward into the middle of the room and again for no reason to retire. A low tumult of sound—abuse or complaint—burst from all: there were hot passages of words, cries, curses, gesticulations, or the beginnings of muttered prayers, noise, and crying children—but all kept under restraint, and yet filling the gloomy blackened room with a sense of alarm.

Jasiek awoke completely, and with his shoulders pressed to the now cooling fireplace, looked round curiously at the people as far as he could make them out.

'Where are they going?' he asked the beggar.

'To Brazil.'

'Is it far?'

'Ho! ho! it's the end of the world, beyond the tenth sea.'

'And why?'

'First because they are fools, and second because they are unfortunate.'

'And do they know the way?' Jasiek asked again, hugely astonished.

But the beggar was no longer answering him; pushing on the woman with a stick, he came forward into the middle of the room, fell on his knees, and began in a sort of plaintive chant:

'You are going beyond the seas, the mountains, the forests—to the end of the world. The Lord Jesus bless you, orphans! The Virgin of Czenstochowa keep you, and all the saints help you in return for the farthing that you give to this poor cripple...To the Lord's Transfiguration! Ave Maria....'

'Gratia plena: the Lord be with you,' murmured the woman, kneeling at his side.

'Blessed art thou among women,' answered the crowd and pressed forward.

All knelt; a subdued sobbing arose; heads were bowed; trusting and resigned hearts breathed their emotions in prayer. A warm glow of trust kindled the dull eyes and pinched faces, straightened the bent shoulders, and gave them such force that they rose from their prayer heartened and unconquerable.

'Herszlik, Herszlik!' they called to the Jew, who had disappeared into the inner room. They were eager now to go into that unknown world, so terrible and yet so alluring for its very strangeness; eager to take on their shoulders their new fate and to escape from the old.

Herszlik came out armed with a dark lantern, counted the people, made them range themselves in pairs, opened the door: they began to move like some phantom army of misery, a column of ragged shadows, and disappeared at once in the darkness and rain. For a moment there shone in the gloom and amid the tossing trees the solitary light of their guide, for a moment one could hear amid wailing a tremulous hymn, 'He who casts himself on the care of the Lord....' Then the storm broke out again in what seemed like the groan of dying masses.

'Poor creatures! orphans!' whispered Jasiek; a wild grief filled his heart.

Then he returned to the inn, now dumb and dark, for the girl had extinguished the light and gone to sleep, and the singing had ceased in the inner room: only the beggar remained awake; he and the woman were counting the people's alms.

'A poor parish! two threepenny bits and five and twenty farthings—the whole show! Ha! May the Lord Jesus never remember them or help them!'

He went on babbling, but Jasiek no longer listened. Crouched in the fire-place he hid himself as best he could in his still wet cloak and fell into a stony sleep.

A good while after midnight he was awakened by a sharp tug; a light shone straight into his eyes.

'Hey, brother, get up! Who are you? Have you your passport?'

He came to his senses at once: two policemen stood over him.

'Have you your passport?' the policeman asked again, shaking him like a bundle of straw.

But for answer Jasiek jumped to his feet and struck the man with his fist between the eyes, so that he dropped his lantern and fell backwards, while Jasiek darted to the door and ran out. The other policeman chased him, and being unable to catch him, fired.

Jasiek tottered a moment, shrieked, and fell in the mud, then jumped up at once and was lost in the darkness of the forest.